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WOMEN AND EDUCATION

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WOMEN AND EDUCATION

The Present Situation

Education is everywhere regarded as an important step toward economic, social and political improvement. Yet the majority of women, especially in the Third World, have not been able to take full advantage of educational opportunities. Nearly two out of every three illiterate people are women (1), and the gap in literacy rates between men and women is steadily widening (2). Even if women are able to obtain an education, their employment opportunities are often limited because few educational systems teach girls marketable skills.

The problem is reflected both at the teaching and administration levels. Many educated women teach at the primary school level, but they are severely under-represented at the university teaching level. And, for the most part, male administrators design curricula and educational objectives for women. Women rarely occupy executive positions, regardless of the occupational field they have chosen to enter. Thus, not only are women at present severely restricted in their educational and professional advancement; the next generation is deprived of successful professional female role models.

Considering that more and more families are single parent families headed by women, the implications of the lack of educational opportunities for women are serious. According to recent estimates, women who are single parents care for one-third of the world's children, and the numbers appear to be rising (3). It seems that an ever increasing number of women have sole responsibility for the economic support of children, but they are increasingly less equipped to fulfill this role to its maximum potential.

Women who have access to education can, in general, make greater use of previously neglected talents and contribute to the material and intellectual improvement of their families and societies. Education for women, combined with employment strategies, can provide solutions to many pressing development problems.

Past Achievements

Despite a less than perfect global situation for women and educational opportunities, steady and considerable improvements have been made over the past decade. In almost every country for which data is available, girls today receive a better education than their mothers did. Better education for girls and women coincides with declining population growth, lower child mortality rates, better nutritional habits and general improvement in the quality of life. Educational programs for women, combined with measures to stimulate economic activity, appear to influence family size significantly.

Higher educational levels for married women has increased their chances of participating in the formal economy. This is especially important for the well-being of families in Third World countries. Research has shown that women's income is entirely reinvested in family needs while that of men is only partially devoted to their families (4).

Informal education channels, such as the use of extension agents, constitute a practical alternative to provide schooling for less educated and physically isolated women. Much of the hidden potential of women can be expanded by designing educational strategies that overcome the short- and long-term problems of women living far from urban centres, and that address the difficulties of recruiting trainers for isolated areas.

Barriers to Providing Education to Women

There are still a number of significant economic, cultural and institutional barriers preventing full participation of women and girls in the formal and informal educational systems of their countries. Insufficient educational facilities and relatively high school fees pose limitations for boys and girls alike. However, most parents, if they have to make a choice, will encourage their sons rather than their daughters to follow through with schooling.

Some parents perceive that it is simply not worthwhile to invest much in their daughters' education, especially at the post-secondary level. Women's employment opportunities, in comparison with those of men, are likely to be limited. If a daughter finds employment, she might eventually get married and her income might get diverted to her husband's family. Parents also fear that too much education will diminish their daughters' chance to find and keep a husband. And where female chastity and family honour are highly valued, parents will be reluctant to send their daughters off to distant schools. These attitudes prevail most notably in societies where men are expected to be the main breadwinners and the providers of old age security for their parents.

The drop-out rate for girls is significantly higher than that of boys. Being considered a greater asset at home than in school, girls often will drop out of school to help their mothers and to perform vital household or agricultural tasks. Sometimes early marriage or maternity make it impossible to continue in school.

Schools often reflect and reinforce traditional attitudes and expectations for girls. School curricula frequently stress vocational, technical and scientific education for boys and domestic skills, arts and humanities for girls. For example, women constitute only a small minority of students in agricultural studies, despite the fact that they make up a high percentage, often the majority, of agricultural workers (5).

Development projects sometimes have repeated these patterns by offering men courses in skill training, scientific principles of modern production and services, and management and business practices. Women, by contrast, often have the opportunity to acquire training only in family life education, basic home economics, nutrition and cottage industry skills. Participation in non-formal education solely of this type reinforces women's traditional function in reproduction and family maintenance. If a country has an expanding modern sector, women are inadequately prepared for either rural or urban formal employment.

Women also have very limited access to scholarships and programs to receive higher education or vocational training at home or abroad. Systemic or institutional barriers inhibit their participation. Firstly, there often are fewer female candidates from which to choose for such programs given the high drop-out rate at earlier stages of their schooling. Qualification criteria can conflict with family responsibilities. Competition to be selected for these programs is intense, and where negative attitudes exist about the appropriateness and value of training a woman, she may be overlooked in the selection process. It is rare that sponsoring institutions actively encourage the recruitment of female candidates or a program design which incorporates consideration of the needs and restraints of women participants.

Future Action

- * Education and employment are interrelated. Better employment opportunities for women, and accordingly adjusted school curricula will provide incentives for parents and their daughters to give priority to education.
- * Development projects with training components that teach women principles of modern production, technical skills, and business and administrative practices can increase women's participation, and tend to be more effective.
- * Special effort needs to be made to attract and train women for decision-making positions. Women decision-makers tend to be more knowledgeable about women's needs and provide successful role models for the next generation.
- * Literacy programs need to be flexible and to accommodate women's responsibilities and requirements. Special attention must be given to women's and girls' schedules, and the schools need to be easily accessible, especially in areas where women have limited mobility or where it is dangerous for women to venture out alone.
- * Governments need to make firm commitments to changing systemic or institutional barriers to women's participation in work and education. For example, some development agencies have successfully introduced quota systems for female participants in their scholarship and training programs.

- * Strategies to reach women in the non-formal education sector need to be developed, combined with systematic research to analyze the role of women in all development contexts.

Footnotes

1. Quoted in "Literacy for Women : A Development Priority", UNESCO pamphlet, Paris 1981.
2. Riria, J., Literacy Programmes and Consciousness Raising and Women's Role in Development, a paper written for presentation at a literacy seminar for CIDA, p.2.
3. Forward Looking Strategies for the Nairobi Conference, UN Document, New York, May 1985.
4. Tinker, I., "The Real Rural Crisis: Women's Time", Energy Review Paper 097, December 1984.
5. McGrath, Patricia L., The Unfinished Assignment: Equal Education for Women, Worldwatch Paper No. 7, Washington, D.C. 1976.



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